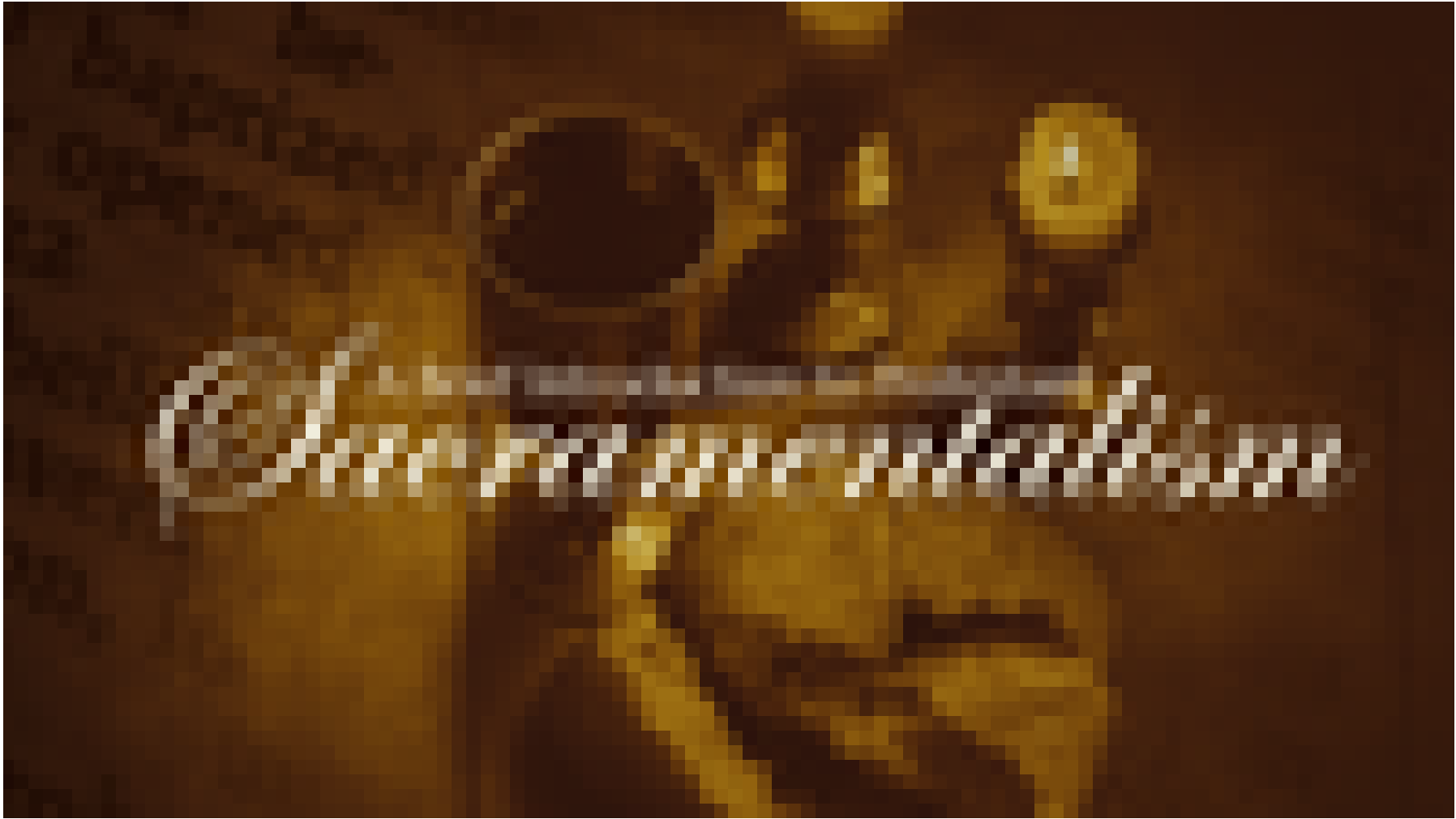


A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO PROTESTANT SACRAMENTALISM

Churches take many different forms. Some of the differences between churches arise from a cultural expression of biblical teachings, while others reflect theological convictions shaped by particular traditions, congregations, or teachers. Sacramentalism, as will be further explained, is a theological position that emphasizes ordinances established by God's word, followed by faithful obedience through sacrament, resulting in divine activity. In contrast, churches that follow a Normative Principle of Worship (to be defined further) may, through well-meaning human creativity, inadvertently drift from God's design for his church as revealed in Scripture. Sacramentalism guards against this by emphasizing a degree of regulation in Christian worship and practice, rooted in God's revealed will. This article will explore some of the biblical, theological, and historical foundations of sacramentalism and argue that a return to a historically Protestant sacramental theology offers the most faithful vision for the life and worship of the church.



THE MEANING OF SACRAMENTALISM

SACRED

The root of sacramentalism is *sacred*, from the Latin *sacer*, denoting something set apart, dedicated to, or belonging to God. Today, sacred things are considered holy, consecrated (bearing sacredity), or worthy of reverence in a religious context, but there is a broader sense of

sacredity. For example, *homo sacer* in Roman society could mean ‘accursed man’ or ‘holy man,’ because *sacer* means to be set apart – from society, in the accursed sense, for God or the gods, in the holiness sense. So, sacred can have a range of meanings, from holy or devoted to sacrifice, to forfeited, accursed, or even criminal. Yet, this broad historical usage frames the way the term is used throughout Christian history and today.

For early Christians, being sacred meant being set apart for or by God or *sacer Deo*. Thus, *sacer* is used to translate the Hebrew word *qadosh*, meaning holy, set apart, or dedicated. [Isaiah 6:3](#), for example, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,” comes from the Hebrew, “Qadosh, qadosh, qadosh, Yahweh Tseva’ot,” and is rendered in Latin as, “Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth.” (NOTE: The Latin, *Sabaoth*, transliterates the Hebrew *Tseva’ot*, meaning hosts or armies.) In [Isaiah 6:3](#), the seraphim proclaim that Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, is set apart–holy or consecrated (made sacred). Similarly, [Leviticus 27:28](#) declares, “No devoted [consecrated] thing that a man devotes [consecrates] to the LORD...shall be sold or redeemed; every devoted [consecrated] thing is most holy [qadosh (Hebrew), sacer (Latin), sacred (English)] to the LORD.” Under the Law, things, people, places, and times (ex., the Sabbath) could be declared *holy*, meaning they are *sacred*.

Not often does a concept carry across ancient languages so simply as we see between *sacer* and *qadosh*, but this is occasionally the case (not that there isn’t any variation in nuance). The New Testament also has a parallel term that will help to understand the nature of the sacred in the Second Temple period. The Greek word *hagios* also translates to holy, set apart, or pure in English.

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For example, *hagios* modifies Spirit when the text speaks of the Holy Spirit (e.g., [Matthew 1:18](#), [Luke 3:22](#)). Again, this points to God as being, by nature, set apart from creation, which is a natural connotation of the Creator. Further, *hagios* is used in [2 Timothy 3:15](#) to describe the scriptures or sacred writings (*hiera grammata*). In both examples, God extends his sacredity to the created world. It’s not humans who

consecrate the Spirit, but the Spirit is, by nature, holy. Further, humans do not consecrate the scriptures, but the scriptures are the holy writings according to God's holy decree.

God is the source of the sacred. In Scripture, people consecrate things to God as sacred, but it is ultimately God who makes anything truly holy. While the Old Testament demonstrates this perspective, the New Testament is more explicit: God actively extends his holiness to his creation. Holiness is not something inherent in creation itself, but rather, is imparted by God. Therefore, if God commands his people to be holy ([Leviticus 19:2](#); [1 Peter 1:16](#)), it is God who must enable holiness. As Paul states, God-fearers in Rome are “called [by God] to be saints [holy ones, *hagios*, *sanctis*]” ([Romans 1:7](#); [1 Corinthians 1:2](#)), thus God pours out his Spirit upon his Church.

THE BIBLICAL DATA ON SACREDNESS COULD BE SUMMARIZED AS FOLLOWS:

God is sacred

Sacredness comes from God

God makes people, places, objects, and times sacred for sacred purposes

Humans recognize sacred things through consecration, but it is God who makes them holy

SACRAMENT

Simply speaking, a sacrament is a sacred thing, which, being sacred, belongs to God and is extended to humankind. The Latin origin of the word sacrament is *sacramentum*, often understood as a solemn oath or a mystery. Interestingly, the Latin Vulgate only uses *sacramentum* in the Old Testament within the book of Daniel, always to translate the idea of mystery:

super sacramento isto, “concerning this mystery [sacrament]” ([Daniel 2:18](#))

sacramentum revelatum est, “the mystery [sacrament] was revealed” ([Daniel 2:19](#))

sacramentum quod rex interrogat, “the mystery [sacrament] which the king asks about” ([Daniel 2:27](#))

sacramentum hoc revelatum est, “this mystery [sacrament] has been revealed” ([Daniel 2:30](#))

quoniam potuisti aperire sacramentum hoc, “because you were able to reveal this mystery [sacrament]” ([Daniel 2:47](#))

quem ego scio quod spiritum deorum sanctorum habeas in te et omne sacramentum non est impossibile tibi, “whom I know has the spirit of the holy [sacred] gods in him and no mystery [sacrament] is impossible for you” ([Daniel 4:6](#))

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Every instance of *sacramentum* in the Old Testament is actually translated from the Aramaic portions of the book of Daniel and is regularly translated into English as *mystery* and into the Greek LXX as *mysterion*, yet maintains the concept of sacredity.

Latin	English	LXX Greek
<i>super sacramento isto</i> (Daniel 2:18)	concerning this mystery [sacrament]	<i>peri tou mystēriou toutou</i>
<i>sacramentum revelatum est</i> (Daniel 2:19)	the mystery [sacrament] was revealed	<i>apekalyphthē to mystērion</i>
<i>sacramentum quod rex interrogat</i> (Daniel 2:27)	the mystery [sacrament] the king asks about	<i>to mystērion ho ho basileus eperōta</i>
<i>sacramentum hoc revelatum est</i> (Daniel 2:30)	this mystery [sacrament] has been revealed	<i>apekalyphthē to mystērion touto</i>
<i>quoniam potuisti aperire sacramentum hoc</i> (Daniel 2:47)	because you were able to reveal this mystery [sacrament]	<i>hoti ēdynēthēs anakalupsai to mystērion touto</i>

Latin	English	LXX Greek
<i>omne sacramentum non est impossibile tibi</i> (Daniel 4:6)	no mystery [sacrament] is impossible for you	<i>kai pan mystērion ouk adynatei soi</i>

Notice, in [Daniel 4:6](#), sacraments are through the “sacred gods” (or “sacred God;” *’elahin qaddisin*), further emphasizing the expectation that the sacred extends to the secular. The secular does not invoke the sacred; instead, the sacred infiltrates the secular. (This inversion, incidentally, is the same mistake of the social rebellion we call the Tower of Babel, an invocation of the divine according to human initiative—but that is a topic for another discussion.)

Notice also the ways that *sacramentum* is used in the New Testament and how it relates to *sacramentum* in Daniel.

Latin	English	Greek
<i>sacramentum voluntatis suae</i> (Ephesians 1:9)	the mystery [sacrament] of his will	<i>to mysterion tou thelematos autou</i>
<i>revelatione notum mihi sacramentum</i> (Ephesians 3:3)	by revelation the mystery [sacrament] was made known to me	<i>kata apokalypsin egnoristhe moi to mysterion</i>
<i>intelligere potestis sacramentum Christi</i> (Ephesians 3:4)	the mystery [sacrament] of Christ	<i>to mysterion tou Christou</i>
<i>sacramentum hoc magnum est</i> (Ephesians 5:32)	this is a great mystery [sacrament]	<i>to mysterion touto mega estin</i>
<i>sacramentum quod absconditum fuit</i> (Colossians 1:26)	the mystery [sacrament] that was hidden	<i>to mysterion to apokekrymmenon</i>
<i>sacramentum hoc inter gentes</i> (Colossians 1:27)	this mystery [sacrament] among the Gentiles	<i>to mysterion touto en tois ethnesin</i>

Latin	English	Greek
<i>agnitionem sacramenti Dei</i> (Colossians 2:2)	the understanding of the mystery [sacrament] of God	<i>epignosin tou mysteriou tou theou</i>
<i>magnum est pietatis sacramentum</i> (1 Timothy 3:16)	great is the mystery [sacrament] of godliness	<i>mega estin to tes eusebeias mysterion</i>

Sacramentum is translated into English as mystery and from the Greek *mysterion*. It's easy to take for granted the understanding of words in English and perhaps to believe that sacramentalism can be rationally explained—and perhaps it can be to some extent—but, as a divine expression in the physical world, it ought to be somewhat difficult to understand or explain using human rational faculties.

Consider the ways mystery was understood in the ancient world. For example, a mystery cult refers to a religious group that demands secrecy from its participants, who had to undergo sacred rites for membership—rites that assumed some form of divine initiative underlying the mystery. This cultural background may form part of the conceptual backdrop for the Greek word *mysterion* in the New Testament and the Septuagint. This is particularly the case given the use of *mysterion* in the LXX translation of Daniel, which likely provides the most immediate background for New Testament usage. As seen in Daniel, **a mystery was a revealed secret**—something **that could not be understood apart from divine revelation** (the word) or explanation. This idea is undoubtedly the force behind the many uses of *mysterion* in the New Testament. Jesus used the term *mysterion*, referring to the secrets of the Kingdom of God that he revealed to his disciples ([Matthew 13:11](#); cf. [Mark 4:11](#); [Luke 8:10](#)).

It is noteworthy that the Gospel references to *mysterion* are not included in the list of Latin uses of *sacramentum* above. This is because *mysterion* can be translated into Latin either as *mysterium* or *sacramentum*, depending on context. Generally, it is rendered as *mysterium* in narrative contexts and *sacramentum* in theological contexts, although both traditionally translate to English as mystery. *Mysterium* seems to, further, feed into mystical theology, contemplation, and the sense of divine secrets, whereas *sacramentum* is used for visible sacraments in the early church—outward signs of inward divine realities—especially as Augustine famously put it, “A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace” (De Catechizandis Rudibus, Chapter 26).

In this light, we should spend some time on [Ephesians 1:9](#), which in Latin is translated as “sacramentum voluntatis suae,” understood in English as “mystery [sacrament] of his will.” As stated, sacraments extend from God to man. Marius Victorinus, the fourth century African

rhetorician wrote, “Not only has God a will, but the intention of his will is expressed in Christ. Hence all things are done through him. **There is nothing in the mystery [sacrament] that is not done through Jesus Christ**” (Epistle to the [Ephesians 1.1.9](#)). Here, Marius explains that the sacraments extend to man from God through the incarnational work of Christ. He claims thus, because “In [Christ]...we have redemption...according to...grace...making known to us the mystery [sacrament] of his will, according to his purpose...set forth in Christ” ([Ephesians 1:7-9](#)). In simpler terms, the sacrament is knowable because God has made it known through Christ.

SACRAMENTAL

The sacrament (noun) takes on the adjectival form through the addition of the suffix *al*, from Latin *alis*, meaning ‘pertaining to’ or ‘relating to.’ Adding *al* turns *sacrament* from a *thing* (noun) into a *descriptor* (adjective), emphasizing its relation to sacred states and activities. Thus, ***sacramental* means pertaining to a sacrament or characterized by sacredity or mystery.** However, sacramental cannot be detached from its historical grammatical/literary usage, thus creating a sacrament out of that which God has not ordained a sacrament. Sacramental *things* are ordained by God, even if enacted by men within physical space.

One or another error is often made regarding sacramentalism. On one extreme, it is claimed that men cannot enact a sacrament. Thus, an activity ordained by God for use by men must be merely an ordinance (that which has been ordained or commanded) for memorial purposes. On the other extreme, one may fear that the introduction of human creativity, not unlike Pagan magic, could be employed to invoke divine activity. For example, Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire from Yahweh for initiating a sacrament not commanded by Yahweh ([Leviticus 10:1-2](#)). Historic orthodoxy has preserved sacramental language for that which has been ordained by God to invoke divine activity; thus, divinely ordained activities are sacramental, not merely ordinary (i.e., regular or normative, pertaining to the natural order).

THE SIGN AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

In this discussion, it is necessary to note the theological distinction between the sign and the thing signified—a distinction that safeguards the sacred nature of the sign performed in the visible/physical dimension. The sacrament consists of both the visible sign and the invisible grace it signifies, often referred to as the ‘sign’ and the ‘thing signified.’ A physical object or activity has no divinity of itself unless God

ordains its significance. Therefore, the sacrament is not merely a physical action or material element, but points beyond itself to a higher reality, as it is also undergirded by the divine grace that gives it significance.

In Augustine's terms, there is the *signum* (Latin for sign, referring to the physical element) and the *res* (Latin for thing, matter, issue, or affair; that is, the spiritual or higher-order reality—the thing God intends to signify through the sign). Both are necessary for the reality of the sacrament. Augustine illustrates, “The word comes to the element [the sign, *signum*], and it becomes the mystery [sacrament, *sacramentum*]” (De Doctrina Christiana 3.9.13). Notice for Augustine, God's Word makes the *signum* capable of signifying the *res*. It is God's Word coming to the physical element (the signum), which makes the visible sign capable of signifying the invisible reality (res), thus making it a sacrament—a tangible, visible mystery.

Therefore, the visible sign and the thing signified are distinct yet united by divine institution (through God's word). The physical elements (e.g., water, bread, wine) or activities (the Sabbath, perhaps) are real and necessary, but they do not, in themselves, automatically convey grace apart from God's institution. The unity between the sign and the thing signified is not natural but conventional, always extending from God's activity.

To confuse the sign with the thing signified leads to theological error. **Focusing only on the outward sign** risks reducing the sacraments to mere ritualism. Further, **insistence on divine involvement** through merely physical rites can also be compared to magic—the performance of rituals with the intention of invoking or binding spirits. Both errors focus on what is (or is not) produced by the religious rite. But that is not the point of the sacraments. Sacramentalism involves a physical response to how God reveals himself to us in accordance with his revelation, which is then understood as participation with the divine. For example, Jesus said, “Unless you eat...and drink...you have no life in you” ([John 6:53](#)). The church eats and drinks at the Lord's table as the Word commanded, and through the physical rite, God conveys the grace of life to the church—the most perspicuous understanding of Christ's words. Therefore, the idea of sacraments could be synthesized in the following ways:

Word → Sacrament → Divine Activity

Divine Ordinance → Physical Response → Participation with God

SACRAMENTALISM

Sacramentalism refers to a practice, system, doctrine, or belief (as implied by the suffix *ism*) that is sacramental. The Greek suffix *ismos* and the Latin *ismus* typically carry the sense of ‘a practice’ or ‘a philosophy.’ Thus, sacramentalism refers to a practice or philosophy—perhaps a philosophical practice—that explains the sacramental. Sacramentalism is a pattern of ancient thought that evolved, particularly during the early centuries of the Church, and thus the discipline falls within the field of Systematic Theology. There is no clear, perspicuous argument for sacramentalism, as developed in the Scriptures, as would be expected from Biblical Theology. For example, Jesus ordains that Christians should “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood” and that those who do so “have life” ([John 6:53](#)). Biblical Theology recognizes that the divine Christ ordains the sacrament and its purpose (life), but the sacrament itself is not given philosophical treatment in Christ’s words; it is simply presented as producing, by divine ordinance, a divine result—namely, life. As a systematic theology, sacramentalism is derived from the philosophy of the sacraments as they are presented in the Scriptures and as the Church’s thinking on sacramental realities developed through church history.

Sacramentalism, as a worldview, expects that sacraments will not be treated as mere symbols (in which case they are referred to as ordinances), but rather as means by which God’s grace is actually conveyed to human participants. It is **a theological position that hears the Word (divine institution), enacts the Word (the thing), and experiences the Word (the thing signified)**. Where a sacrament is the thing and sacramental refers to its quality, sacramentalism is the theological perspective that treats sacramental realities—such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist, Communion), among others—as central elements of worship and the Christian life, and for some traditions, as essential to salvation. Sacramentalism, therefore, is a worldview in which we expect God to convey grace to humankind through every means he ordains through his Word.

THE MEMORIAL VIEW OF THE SACRAMENTS

The memorial view typically refers to the sacraments as ordinances, so as not to suggest a sacred presence in the rites. Few memorialists, however, would argue that God does nothing or has done nothing regarding the ordinances; thus, sacramentalism and memorialism should not be seen as strict opposites. There have been minority views throughout history that deny the helpfulness and/or necessity of the sacraments altogether (Quakers, Salvation Army, and various mystical traditions, most of which lose the sacraments because of their insistence that all of life is in some way sacramental). Memorialist, at the very least, seek obedience to God’s ordinances and recognize their divine institution.

Sacramentalism emphasises the sacraments as **means by which God's grace is conveyed** to humankind. Memorialism, conversely, sees the **ordinances as mere commands** (things Christ commanded or ordained) rather than as a means of grace or a participation in God's divinity. Because there is no expectation of divine activity in the practice of the ordinance, there is no need to analyze the divine institution, as seen in the way Augustine and other Church Fathers interpreted the mysteries. But that does not mean memorialists do not believe the sacraments are efficacious in any sense. Sacramentalism and memorialism agree there is an effect, but differ in their views on efficacy and what they are effective in producing. Sacramentalism, as seen, describes the effect as a conveyance of God's grace (a divine activity). Memorialists, however, see the effect as primarily intellectual and emotional (belonging to natural human faculties). The rites are more about the effect that obedience and faith have on the individual than what God, through his presence, enacts in the life of the Church.

A word must be said about the term 'ordinance,' used in place of sacrament in memorialist traditions. Ordinance comes from the Latin *ordinare*, meaning 'to order or arrange.' The term is related to governance, which is why the Latin root *ordo* appears in other words, such as ordain and ordination, terms associated with authority and the expression of that authority to bring order.

The Latin word *ordo* is also curiously used as the root of our word ordinary. The suggestion of authority in terms like ordinance and ordination might suggest the ordinances are special, rather than ordinary. However, in theology, ordinary refers to the normal pattern of Christian life, as opposed to extraordinary expressions of divine activity. Elders/pastors are ordained, but sometimes referred to as 'the ordinary,' because a primary function of elders is to regulate (bring order to) a habitual practice of worship (as opposed to special or occasional acts of worship). Thus, those ordained perform the ordinances as an ordinary worship practice. What's ironic in the majority of memorialist congregations today is that **the ordinances are anything but ordinary**. They are rather occasional, performed on a quarterly, monthly, or yearly basis, sometimes to commemorate annual Christian holidays. **Only sacramentalists hold to the ordinary practice of the ordinances!**

Sacramentalism and memorialism both maintain a high regard for the rites, and no conversation on the matter can proceed if commonality is not first established, namely that both views believe God has ordained the rites. The differences primarily lie in the understanding of **what the rites accomplish**. This leads to two further analytical questions: 1) *How many sacraments are there?* and 2) *To what degree are ordinary churches really non-sacramental?*

HOW MANY SACRAMENTS ARE THERE?

It's important to distinguish between a sacramental practice and the sacraments. Certainly, the sacraments are sacramental, but not every sacramental act of the church should be decreed a sacrament. Historically, baptism and the Lord's Supper (also known as the Eucharist or Communion) are considered sacraments (or ordinances) in most Christian traditions. However, the Catholic Church officially recognizes seven, and the Eastern Orthodox Church, traditionally (though not dogmatically), recognizes the same seven. In the East, some recognize the mystical nature of the church as such that everything is sacramental, most notably, Maximus the Confessor. If we are to define sacramentalism as has been done herein, Maximus is right. In everything the church does (or should do), there is an ordination by the Word, followed by human activity that is divinely imbued.

Consider the ordination of elders (priests, pastors, etc.). Many Protestants who only recognize two sacraments will criticize the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches for creating a sacrament out of ordination (among other sacraments beyond the two). The Apostle Paul argues that all gifts are apportioned to individuals by the Holy Spirit and that gifting is according to the Spirit's will ([1 Corinthians 12:11](#)). Therefore, those gifted to be elders in the Church have a special apportionment for purposes of differentiating God's specific will for the individual within the life of the church. Ordination, then, is instituted by God according to his Spirit, executed through human ordination rites (various traditions churches use to recognize elders), and it is believed that God is active in the ordination because God has poured out his Spirit for the gifting of the ordained elder. On these grounds, it may meet the criteria to be called a sacrament (Word → Sacrament → Divine Activity). But there is more to the discussion.

Where ordination differs from baptism and the Lord's Supper is that ordination is not a universal sacrament for the church. It's difficult to make this distinction biblically, as it is represented more fully in historical theology. As noted previously, in the East, the number of sacraments is merely a tradition, not a dogma, and some are more comfortable recognizing the broadly sacramental nature of the church. However, another illustration can be seen in Martin Luther's perception of the sacraments. He affirmed two sacraments as most Protestants, but Luther also criticized the Catholic church for withholding the cup from the laity during the Eucharist, emphasizing that Christ's command at the Last Supper to "Drink of it, all of you" ([Matthew 26:27](#)) was directed to all Christians, not just the clergy. In other words, the Lord's Supper is a sacrament because it is universally sacramental. A similar pattern is observed in baptism—it is never regularly withheld from any professing Christian. As the Ethiopian Eunuch declares, "What prevents me from being baptized?" ([Acts 8:36](#)).

Notice how each of the other seven sacraments of the Catholic Church (save for possibly one) is lacking in part of the formula to be considered a sacrament.

Confirmation (or Chrismation in the Eastern Orthodox Church) lacks the institution through the Word. There is no biblical command, and credobaptists (those who baptize by faith), in particular, will emphasize that the catechesis required for confirmation should usually be done prior to baptism (although most will also stress the importance of ongoing Christian discipleship after baptism).

Anointing of the sick is neither universal regarding those who perform the anointing nor by those who necessarily receive the anointing, though there is an institution pointing to the sacramental nature of anointing the sick in [James 5:14-15](#).

Marriage is nearly universal, and many Protestants are sympathetic to the sacramental nature of marriage for good reason. However, Paul is clear that marriage is not necessarily universal ([1 Corinthians 7:7-9](#)). An unmarried person does not lack the Spirit in the same way as one who refuses baptism or the Lord's Supper.

As already addressed, **ordination** (or Holy Orders) lacks universality. Where it is sacramental, it is not universal and therefore not a sacrament.

Confession (also known as penance or reconciliation) is a fascinating one. Christians are commanded, “confess your sins to one another” ([James 5:16](#)). In church traditions where confession is practiced, sins are typically confessed to the priest, rather than to one another. Confessing to a priest is not wrong; it is still ‘confessing to another’ and a tradition based on biblical practice. However, confession, the way it is derived biblically, isn’t sacramental in that the priest (or another) cannot provide absolution as claimed in some traditions. Neither is it biblically evident that absolution is given by God on the grounds of the confession (unless a practice of formal confession is read into [1 John 1:9](#), which is not the most natural reading).

Other Christian traditions have argued for sacraments or ordinances beyond the traditional two.

Foot Washing (*Anabaptist, Church of the Brethren, some Baptists, Eastern Orthodox on Maundy Thursday*)

The Holy Leaven (Malka) (*Assyrian Church of the East*)

The Sign of the Cross (*Eastern Orthodox*)

Monastic Tonsure (*sometimes treated sacramentally by the Eastern Orthodox*)

Confession of Faith (*Some Evangelical and Baptist traditions, treated as a public ordinance*)

Head Covering (*Certain Anabaptist traditions, practiced as a perpetual ordinance*)

Anointing and Consecration of Kings (*Historically in Eastern and Western traditions, sometimes treated as a sacramental rite*)

Laying on of Hands for Healing (*Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions, treated as a means of continuing grace*)

Covenant Meals/Love Feasts (*Methodist, Moravian, and some Pentecostal traditions, closely related to Eucharist but distinct*)

Spiritual Baptism (Baptism in the Holy Spirit) (*Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, often considered separate from water baptism*)

It's also interesting that the extra sacraments (that is, other than the two) need to be argued into the Scriptures. They are not naturally derived or self-evident. Conversely, baptism and the Lord's Supper are so evident in scripture that they are never formally commanded, yet are practiced universally since the first generation of the Church. (It is assumed that the Lord's Supper was practiced as often as the church gathered, ex., [Acts 2:46](#), [1 Corinthians 11:26](#). Baptism is prescribed as a means of making disciples, ex., [Matthew 28:19](#).) Therefore, in this model, **there are two formal sacraments, but the sacramental church recognizes the broadly sacramental nature of everything** the church practices according to God's word.

ARE ORDINARY CHURCHES REALLY NON-SACRAMENTAL?

When Christians in memorialist traditions view the sacraments as only symbolic ordinances, their obedience to Christ's command still places them within the divine action. God's grace is never limited by human understanding. Thus, by participating in Christ's appointed acts in faith, even without a sacramental understanding, memorialist churches still receive the grace God conveys through these rites. Consider the following:

God's faithfulness is not nullified by human faithfulness ([Romans 3:3-4](#)).

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" ([John 14:15](#)), emphasising the doing, not a theological understanding with all of its metaphysical implications.

The Apostle Paul stresses the real participation in Christ through the bread and cup, not dependent on human explanation but on God's divine activity ([1 Corinthians 10:16](#)).

God's provision is not contingent upon recognizing him as its source ([Matthew 5:45](#)).

Jesus does not directly explain what it means to eat his flesh or how it is to be eaten, but merely notes, “If anyone eats of this bread [my flesh], he will live forever” ([John 6:51](#)).

Further, there is a clear pattern in the scriptures of ‘doing before understanding.’ For example, the Israelites observed the Passover long before fully grasping its typological connection to Christ (cf. Exodus 12 and [1 Corinthians 5:7](#)). The disciples participated in breaking bread without fully grasping the significance at the Last Supper ([Luke 22:19-20](#)). Baptized followers of Jesus in Acts obeyed, often immediately (ex., [Acts 2:41](#)), without sacramental theology. In the same way, God’s grace in the sacraments works through obedience because of his promise, not because of human comprehension—in all things, God’s grace (promise) is never derived from human merit.

Though memorialist churches view the sacraments primarily as symbolic ordinances, their faithful observance of Christ’s commands still conveys divine grace—they are not non-sacramental! Thus, **even without a right understanding of the sacraments, participants still receive grace**, not because of their theological precision, but **because of Christ’s faithfulness to his word**. The greater concern in contemporary memorialist churches is not their symbolic view of the sacraments, but their irregular participation in them (i.e., occasional practice of the rites), when sacramentalism demands ordinary participation.

SACRAMENTALISM AS PARTAKING OF THE DIVINE NATURE

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ([2 Peter 1:3–4](#))

Cyril of Jerusalem directly connects [2 Peter 1:4](#) to the Lord’s Table, “By partaking of the body and blood of Christ, you become of the same body and blood with him. In this way we become Christ-bearers, since his body and blood are distributed throughout our limbs. Thus, according to the blessed Peter, we become partakers of the divine nature” (Catechetical Lectures, 22.3). Cyril explicitly argues that the eating and drinking of the body and blood produces ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (what the Eastern Orthodox refer to as Theosis). You can also hear the famous words of Athanasius of Alexandria in this statement, “For He was made man that we might be made god [divine]” (On

the Incarnation, 54.3). Incarnationally, the body and blood of Christ, the divine nature, are poured out on the participants of the sacrament. As Paul writes, “The cup of blessing...is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?” ([1 Corinthians 10:16](#)).

The memorialist could claim that the symbolic participation of the Lord’s Supper trains the mind (or *nous*) as they reflect on Christ’s sacrifice. They could even claim that the Supper has been ‘granted’ according to God’s ‘divine power.’ However, the memorialist perspective cannot account for the way the Supper conveys the ‘divine nature’ so that the partakers become participants in Christ’s divinity (man becoming divine). In the sacramental tradition, the Supper is not a mere reminder of Christ’s work but a mystical communion where the glorified Christ is present, with the effect that the participant is transformed into his likeness. This is why Luther, though denying the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, emphasizes a real presence of Christ ‘in’ and ‘with’ the elements: “We believe, teach, and confess that the body and blood of Christ are truly and essentially present **in** the Supper and are truly distributed and received **with** the bread and wine” (Formula of Concord, Declaration VII.35).

The memorialist is correct in emphasizing that it is through knowledge of God (or by God’s word) that God’s promises are received. Knowledge isn’t absent in the sacramental view (i.e., it is not entirely mysterious), but it is not the power that brings about divinity through participation in the divine nature. In the sacramental view, divinity is seen as Christ himself, with his divine power, being the source of divinity. In contrast, the memorialist must argue that divinity stems from the transformation of the mind through the knowledge of God’s promises. This does not fit the paradigm of Catholic, Orthodox, or early Protestant theology and runs the risk of reducing divinity to a sense of God-like morality.

CAN PROTESTANTS BE SACRAMENTALISTS?

Often, the topic of sacramentalism and memorialism is reduced to the idea that Orthodox and Catholic theology is sacramental, whereas Protestant theology is memorial. This could not be further from the truth. Indeed, there have been few within the so-called sacramental traditions who have argued for memorialism. And it is only within the Zwinglian school that early Protestants were memorialists. All early Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans subscribed to a sacramental view. It may, however, be said that most contemporary evangelical doctrine reflects the memorial view, though anecdotal evidence suggests an openness, yet ambivalence towards the topic at the local church level. Thus, all Christians share a sacramental history, regardless of any current views.

With all that has already been said about sacramentalism, nothing further needs to be written to argue for Protestant sacramentalism. But there may be one more distinctly Protestant idea that can be helpful here. Many Reformation thinkers emphasized what is today called the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW), arguing that **only what God has expressly commanded in Scripture** is permitted in the worship and practice of the church. The Westminster Confession of Faith reads, “...the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself and so limited by his own revealed will that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men...” (21.1). Human creativity in worship (Normative Principle of Worship or NPW, cf. Nadab and Abihu) can only exist apart from sacramentalism. But if even memorialist churches are technically sacramental when they obey God’s instituted means for worship, then human creativity is the only way to be truly non-sacramental, and likewise, places the Church outside of the purposes of God. It should be noted that not everything that is considered (or not) RPW today is necessarily what the Reformers had in mind. But in its general expression, RPW sets up the sacramental perspective of Word → Sacrament → Divine Activity, as previously discussed. If the Scriptures reflect God’s Word that ordains the sacrament in which we participate in divine realities, then human creativity cannot invoke a sacrament.

One criticism of contemporary evangelicalism is that its use of the NPW has led to practices so far removed from Scripture that the church is, in many cases, barely recognizable as a biblical church. It doesn’t take a microscope to see the ways that NPW, common in memorialist churches, has ravaged historical Protestant liturgies on the grounds that ‘It’s good if it works.’ This type of theological pragmatism sets goals adjacent to or opposed to scripture, leaving these churches anemic to the presence of God and divine participation. It may ‘work’ to count professions, but it also lacks much in transforming the saints into the image of Christ. Conversely, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches are often criticized for developing traditions that go beyond—or appear contrary to—the teachings explicitly found in Scripture. However, such criticisms require nuance. Most historic traditions within these churches have developed symbolically and liturgically from the teachings of the Apostles and Prophets, even if their forms are not directly outlined in Scripture. In contrast to both extremes—creative innovation on one hand, and potentially unbounded tradition on the other—the most reliable path to a biblically grounded faith, in this author’s estimation, is to remain within the bounds of historic Protestantism, where sacramental theology develops as a product of God’s word.

CONCLUSION

As stated at the outset, churches take many different forms. While some of these forms arise from cultural expressions of biblical truth, others stem from theological convictions that shape a church’s worship, structure, and sacramental life. This article has argued for

sacramentalism as a theological position that hears the word, enacts the word through ordained rites, and experiences divine activity through participation in the divine rites. **Sacramentalism, therefore, safeguards the church by rooting worship and practice not in human creativity but in God's revealed will**—the worship of God as he has ordained.

By contrast, churches shaped by NPW may drift from biblical patterns of worship, not out of rebellion but out of well-meaning innovation. Likewise, some traditions, though rich in beautiful symbolism and history, may drift into obscurities that go beyond the biblical witness. But rather than embracing extremes—either creative detachment or unchecked tradition—historic Protestant sacramentalism holds fast to the word of God, recognizes the visible signs instituted by Christ, and expects divine activity in response to faithful obedience.

In the end, **sacramentalism is** not about choosing between tradition and innovation, but **about recognizing that the church flourishes most when its worship, life, and practice are regulated by God's word, enacted in obedient faith, and sustained by God's grace.**